Are You Prepared for the New Role Associations Will Play?

The Need for "Just In Time Knowledge" is Highly Evident

By Jim Carroll

If you want to understand the future role of your association, you might want to spend some time staring at an iPod Nano.

Arguably the hottest consumer technology in a marketplace that astounds everyone with a furious rate of technological innovation, it's more than just a cool piece of electronic hardware that plays music. It's a good barometer of the fact that we live and work in a world in which massive, sudden, wrenching change will become the norm, not the exception.

And it will be by helping your members cope with, adjust to, and prepare for this rate of change that you will find the evolution of your new role.

Billion dollar market shifts

When Steve Jobs introduced the Nano, he also announced that the company would no longer manufacture the larger sized iPod Mini. That particular device had been, up until that moment of its instant demise, one of the coolest MP3 players around, generating annualized revenue of over $1 billion US. What is even more amazing to think about is that the Mini itself was a relatively new product, having been introduced just one and a half years prior to its demise.

Think about that for a moment: we now find ourselves in a period of time in which innovation and change is occurring so quickly that the very concept of a product lifecycle is beginning to disappear. And just as product lifecycles collapse, so too does the half life of knowledge and the relevance of skills.

The rapidity of change

If you want to have a bit of fun in understanding the rate of change that surrounds us today, go and dig out your old marketing textbook. Take a look at the graphs used in the chapter where the concept of a product lifecycle was described, and you'll notice that "market maturity" often was not reached until 5, 10 or 20 years after the introduction of a product.

This is no longer the case, and indeed, ridiculously short product life spans such as seen with the Nano are becoming more the norm than the exception. Just think about the changes occurring with your cell phone.

Whether we are dealing with medical, scientific, financial and business, mechanical or engineering issues, one thing is clear: the knowledge that you need to know to do your job today is becoming infinitely more complex every minute, with a constant, relentless flood of that which is new. And from my perspective, the story of the iPod Mini tells us several things about the unique needs that your members will find themselves faced with in the not too distant future (if they aren't already there today):

- the ability of obtaining rapid, instant knowledge is becoming an urgent necessity in almost every field of endeavor;
- the ability to quickly digest, understand and assess new knowledge is an increasingly important skill – one that not a lot of individuals have mastered;
- the ability to reformulate our thinking, assumptions and capabilities to respond to the constant change being thrust upon us is of increasing importance

In a nutshell, I coined the phrase "just in time knowledge" over a decade ago to describe the nexus of these realities. In the world of hyper-change represented by the iPod Nano, it's clear that we are already there.

Just in Time Knowledge

Just in time knowledge isn't the same as "continual learning." That particular phrase became popular when it became evident that all of us would have to constantly refresh our knowledge base in order to keep up with change. We've done a good job at mastering that challenge, and many associations have made continual learning a key part of their mandate for their membership base.

It's time to go to the next step, and assess how you can assist your membership by helping them with "just in time knowledge." It's a type of knowledge that is one step beyond continual learning.

Indeed, it's a form of continuous learning that is instant, fast, and urgent. Think about situations where a need for JIT-knowledge is evident:

- Some estimates suggest that medical knowledge is now doubling every eight years. Rapid advances in new method-

ologies, technologies, treatments and methods of care evolve at a furious pace. In such a world, medical professionals can't be expected to know everything there is to know within their particular field of endeavor. The new reality going forward for doctors, nurses and any other professional is that they are increasingly forced to go out and obtain new knowledge, just at the time that they need it.

- Sales based organizations are quickly discovering that furious rates of hyper-innovation in their marketplace require a sales force that is extremely adaptable, agile, flexible -- and quick to understand the potential of new markets. If a product has a life of about six months in the marketplace, an organization can't afford to waste any time in preparing to assault the market. The result is that there is an ever increasing need for sales based organizations to gain deep, rapid insight into the sales potential of a new product line, while discarding the knowledge and understanding they have of the old product line.
- Mechanical engineers continue to see rapid developments in manufacturing methodologies, as well as a need to quickly master the art of offshore manufacturing. With China coming to play such a dominant role as the assembly line for the global economy, every engineer involved in process automation must have the ability to quickly gain insight and intelligence into leading edge issues associated with plant design, construction, automation, assembly, robotics, and all kinds of other complex topics.

In all of these cases, the individual must be able to quickly obtain the right knowledge at the right time for the right purpose for the right strategy, all revolving around the fact that the knowledge is instant, fast, and transitory.

Next steps?

And that's where the future opportunity for associations comes in. For years, you have provided value to your members by helping them to learn. As the very essence of learning begins to change, so too does your role.

Undertake a knowledge turnover assessment. The first thing you need to do is get an accurate picture of just how quickly the issue of just-in-time knowledge is becoming a critical success factor for your membership. How quickly does new knowledge expire in your membership base? How quickly is new knowledge generated? And what does this suggest to you in terms of the knowledge replenishment role that you can play?

Consider the risks and opportunities. What happens if your association, and its members, don't adapt to this fast paced new reality? What's the downside? Now is a good time to frame the future in terms of bold contrasts, and in terms of the cost of inaction.

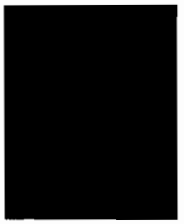
Envision the future. If your membership excels at just-in-time knowledge, what will they be doing in 2015? How will their role have changed? What might they be doing day to day on January 15, 2015, compared to what they are doing today? And what will you, as their knowledge mentor, have done to help them make the transition?

Educate your membership. I'd hazard a guess that few of your members are even thinking about the issue and challenges that come with just-in-time knowledge. If they aren't aware that it is an issue, they likely aren't aware that their future opportunity and success will come from mastering this critical new career skill. If they don't know about the challenges that lie ahead, educate them now.

Adjust your mandate. As an association, you were established for a particular purpose, or perhaps fulfill a variety of mandates. More than likely, a lot of critical thinking went into your mandate in the 20th century. It's the 21st century now, and the future is rushing at you faster than ever before! That's why as you undertake the steps above, you should also ensure that your basic role begins to change.

Prepare a road map and adjust your strategy. Attaining the skill of helping your membership base master just in time knowledge promises to be a long, complex and arduous task – but what an opportunity! Start to rethink everything you do in terms of your new just-in-time knowledge role – whether in your board meetings, strategy sessions, or membership discussions, and you'll find that everyone is thinking the same thing: we need to start working to prepare for it now.

Jim Carroll is an internationally recognized futurist, trends, creativity and innovation expert, with recent clients such as DaimlerChrysler, the US Army Corps of Engineers, Caterpillar, Nestle, Motorola, and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). He welcomes your comments at jcarroll@jimcarroll.com.



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